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25 October 1962

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Soviet Tactics in the Short Run

1. The USSR's objective in the present crisis is to retain the bases in Cuba. The Soviets not only see considerable military value in these installations, but they regard them as a telling demonstration of the long-proclaimed shift in the "world relation of forces." Particularly now that the US has committed itself to their elimination, they believe that, if they can prevail, they will have scored a victory of such proportions that opportunities for further advances will open up in all the areas of East-West contention.

2. Thus the immediate Soviet aim is to deter the US from more drastic action. At the same time, they wish to keep the risks under control.

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3. Their diplomatic moves and conduct at sea to date suggest that they fear further US action may be imminent and wish not to have their prestige further engaged if this should occur. Thus they have turned back a number of ships, refrained from spelling out their commitment to Castro in as strong a fashion as previously, and tried to represent the crisis as primarily between Cuba and the US.

4. The primary Soviet tactic will therefore be to draw the US into negotiations. The Soviets calculate that, if this can be done, they will have laid heavy inhibitions upon further US unilateral action and that, with the passage of time, the existing bases will become part of the status quo. They prefer, of course, that the lifting of the quarantine be made a precondition of negotiations, but they probably will not insist upon this. They will probably propose or accept any of several forms of negotiation in addition to their own proposal for US-Soviet-Cuban talks.

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5. At the present juncture the Soviets probably view a summit meeting as an appealing proposal to break a political stalemate in the UN, which might free the US to take action. With a summit in prospect the pressures for the US to wait would be great. A summit therefore would buy the Soviets some additional time, offer a forum to make a reasonable case of their position and raise the political costs of further US action. At the same time, they would not want to be faced at the summit with an ultimatum or a fait accompli which would redouble the humiliation to the USSR and Khrushchev personally. On balance they probably feel that as long as the US did not appear determined to take action the summit offers more advantages than drawbacks, even though once this alternative is used the possibility for political maneuvering will be almost exhausted.

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6. Although the Soviets would like to minimize the risks at the present juncture, they find it very difficult to acquiesce in the US quarantine. Their actions to date suggest that they could accept for some time a tacit agreement whereby they refrained from sending patently military cargoes into the quarantine area and the US allowed other vessels through upon a verbal declaration of cargo. But we doubt that the Soviets will submit to boarding, since in doing so they would be accepting the quarantine in principle. So long as they wish to avoid incidents, therefore, they will be extremely anxious to determine how the US intends to enforce the quarantine.

7. The time may soon come, however, when the USSR decides that international pressures against the US are proving insufficient to head off further US action. At this point, the Soviets would probably increase tensions by stepping up the element of threat in their pronouncements. Even in this circumstance, however, they are likely to continue avoiding any further commitment to Cuba so long as they remain uncertain about US intentions.

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8. A quarantine incident would probably commend itself to the Soviets as one means of raising tensions and thereby multiplying international pressures upon the US. The best circumstance would be to lead the US into attacking a manifestly peaceful vessel. If the Soviets decide that such an incident is desirable, they would be more concerned with subsequent political exploitation than with some form of equivalent reprisal against the US. If an incident occurs because the Soviets have miscalculated US intentions about enforcement, however, a subsequent reprisal seems more likely.

9. It seems highly improbable that the USSR will agree to withdraw the bases in the absence of major US concessions elsewhere. There is one circumstance, however, in which a break in this Soviet position might occur. The USSR would regard a successful US military action against the bases, or against Cuba as a whole, as a very great defeat to its policies which, moreover, might substantially stiffen Western determination to resist Soviet demands in other confrontations, e.g. Berlin. If, therefore, they believed that US military action was all but imminent and unavoidable, they might make a last-minute offer to dismantle the bases in return for some Western concession which, while not offsetting their loss, offered some prospect of saving face. It is difficult to conceive, however, how the Soviets could frame such an offer and time it properly.